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SUBJECT: POLLSTER: OPPOSITION NEEDS AN "EVERYDAY AGENDA"

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBIN D. MEYER,  
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: Pollster Alfredo Keller predicted to Polcouns on October 23 that the opposition would achieve a tactical alliance in advance of the 2010 legislative elections, but warned about its continued lack of an effective message. Keller suggested that Chavista abstentionism at the polls could defeat Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and contended that Chavez could find a way to postpone or cancel elections, such as by having the Supreme Court (TSJ) declare the new electoral law unconstitutional, if he thought he would lose at the polls. Keller emphasized that Chavez had empowered the poor majority of Venezuelans, thereby "changing Venezuelan politics for good." The opposition could not afford to ignore this poor majority and needed to develop an "everyday agenda" to address their concerns. He suggested the opposition develop a message of "renovating" Venezuela. End Summary.

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THE METHOD: FOCUS GROUPS, POLLS, BUT NO GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS  
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12. (C) Keller's analysis was based on polling results and focus groups that included both Chavistas and opposition-oriented participants. Keller himself openly identified as a member of the opposition and said his firm did not have any government contracts and "only works with democratic groups." Keller has longstanding ties with the COPEI Party and with Christian Democrat-aligned parties in Latin America.

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THE OPPOSITION: Tactical Alliance in Search of a Message  
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13. (C) Keller predicted that the opposition parties and their leadership would achieve a tactical alliance, but not an integrated movement, in advance of the 2010 National Assembly (AN) elections. He assessed that their biggest obstacle would be deciding on an effective message, since the opposition spans the political spectrum. Stressing the "utilitarian" relationship that Venezuelans have with their government, dating back to the 1950s when oil revenues began to be used for social welfare programs, he suggested the opposition develop a message that responds to the "everyday" concerns of voters about the need for the government to address the problems of water, electricity, garbage removal, and especially crime. He said that the opposition AN candidates should run on local issues of "good governance," using the record of the opposition governors. (Note: In

reference to Mayor of Greater Caracas Antonio Ledezma, he said that "the poor little guy" was trying hard to become a national leader, but was too closely identified with the widely discredited opposition Accion Democratica (AD) party to ever succeed. End Note.) Rather than simply attack Chavez, the opposition's message should be one of "renovation" of Venezuela, i.e., building and improving on the progress that had been made under Chavez. For example, the opposition should stress that the Barrio Adentro, Mercal, and other social "mission" programs were good ideas, but badly implemented.

14. (C) Describing Venezuelan politics as "idiosyncratic" rather than "ideological," Keller said that "political language" -- which includes terms like democracy, freedom, dictatorship, and human rights -- does not work with Venezuelan voters, who see it simply as a way for politicians to try to get elected. Nor are critiques of Chavez's policies effective if they are based on "process" arguments rather than results, since he characterized Venezuelans as having a "concrete," as opposed to "abstract," way of thinking. For example, voters are unlikely to think about the impact of expropriations or nationalizations on the level of future investment or productivity, but will be responsive to arguments about the impact of such actions on today's shortages.

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CHAVEZ'S VULNERABILITIES: ABSTENTIONISM, NO COATTAILS  
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15. (C) According to Keller's latest polling, the opposition has a majority, with 53 percent of the population. The

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percentage rises to 66 percent if disaffected Chavistas are included. Keller noted, however, that despite Chavez's decline in popularity and criticism of basic services, Chavistas are unlikely to vote against Chavez himself. The abstention of this bloc of voters could prove decisive, as it was in the defeat of the 2007 Constitutional referendum. Keller assessed that the current situation in the country made it unlikely that Chavez would have coattails for his PSUV candidates in the upcoming elections, and said the opposition should take advantage of this by not making the election about Chavez; attacks against Chavez would only mobilize his supporters to vote.

16. (C) Keller speculated that Chavez would find a way to postpone or cancel the 2010 elections if he thought the PSUV would not win a majority of the AN seats. One method would be for the Supreme Court (TSJ) to declare the new electoral law unconstitutional -- something the opposition has publicly alleged since it was first proposed.

17. (C) Although Keller's polls show that an overwhelming majority of Venezuelans do not want Chavez to continue in office beyond the expiration of his term in 2012, Keller noted that the same voters saw no realistic alternative to Chavez and were concerned about social peace if he were not reelected. He did not believe that Chavez would relinquish power in 2012, and advised that the opposition should begin to lay the basis for 2012 during the AN elections by focusing on the need for "equilibrium" after 2012.

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CHAVEZ CHANGED POLITICS FOR GOOD  
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18. (C) Keller said that Chavez had changed politics for good by empowering a previously disenfranchised sector of the

population, who will remain a vocal part of Venezuelan politics in the future. As a result, the opposition cannot ignore this group. If they do, there will be no social peace. In this sense, Keller said Chavez was a factor for stability. He noted that two of Chavez's key slogans -- "this is how to govern" ("asi, asi se gobierna") and "now, Venezuela is for everyone" ("ahora, Venezuela es para todos") -- reflect the wide appeal of his politics of redistribution of national resources and resentment of the old social and political order. According to Keller, Chavez has succeeded in rewriting history in the minds of many Venezuelans, implanting the idea that all the good social investment that has taken place is the result of the Bolivarian "revolution." For example, he said that many Venezuelans now think that Caracas' metro was built under Chavez, when in fact it was built long before he took office. Similarly, Keller noted that many Venezuelans incorrectly believe that Chavez was responsible for initiating the policy of free public education, when it has been the practice since 1963.

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KELLER: BIO NOTE  
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19. (C) Keller's father was a Catholic activist in pre-World War II Switzerland. When threatened by the Gestapo, he fled to Holland and then to Venezuela, where he met Keller's mother, the daughter of a French businessman living in Venezuela. Keller is a dual national of Venezuela and Switzerland, and he has degrees from French universities. His children live in Europe -- his son is a medical doctor in London and his daughter lives in Paris.

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COMMENT  
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110. (C) Keller's assessment of the opposition's best strategy to win in the 2010 AN elections -- by focusing on day-to-day concerns and by presenting a platform that builds on, rather than criticizes, Chavez' social programs for the poor -- has

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been echoed by other political observers.  
DUDDY